

TOP 30

# Introduction: A Different Kind of College Ranking

By the Editors

This summer, a group of sixty-one liberal arts college presidents announced that they would no longer participate in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings. We were of two minds about this news.

On the one hand, we've long argued that the *U.S. News* ratings are silly, because they don't measure what its editors say they measure: academic excellence. What *U.S. News* does to arrive at its results involves gauging things like average faculty salaries, for instance, or the level of praise for one college from the presidents of other colleges. Maybe that's not totally useless, but it's also a bit like assessing the quality of restaurants based on the effectiveness of their advertising and how much they spend on linen. Given the tremendous influence the *U.S. News* guide nevertheless has on university administrators and prospective students, our first instinct was to cheer the college presidents' Spartacus-like rebellion.

On the other hand, we couldn't help but suspect that what motivated the colleges wasn't just anger at the inadequacies of the *U.S. News* methodology, but a desire to avoid rankings altogether. Though the protesting schools vowed to create their own, better measures of academic excellence, we weren't too surprised to see the group's chair, Gettysburg College President Katherine Haley Will, claim in the *Washington Post* that an "educational experience can't be reduced to one number, a school's so-called rank." Instead, she argued, "we must encourage students to look inside their hearts and trust their instincts when it comes to choosing a college."

How beautiful. Trusting in the oracular powers of the heart may have been the right advice for Obi-wan Kenobi to offer Luke Skywalker as the young Jedi-to-be swung a light saber while blindfolded. But it's understandable that students and parents who are about to plunk down tens of thousands of dollars in tuition for a life-determining college

education might be looking for more solid information. Some colleges and universities simply do a better job of educating students than others, and rankings are the most broadly understandable way to convey that truth. *U.S. News*'s numbers may be deeply flawed, but its aim is perfectly worthy—indeed, it's essential.

But even if *U.S. News* were able to discern the academically "best" schools, that would be only one kind of ranking. There are other, equally important ways to judge colleges. We believe that what colleges do matters not just to prospective applicants, but also to the rest of us. After all, America depends on its institutions of higher education for a variety of crucial public tasks: conducting the cutting-edge research that drives the economy; offering students from low-income families a path to a better life; and positively shaping the characters of the young people who will go on to lead the country. Government provides colleges and universities with billions of dollars in research grants, tax benefits, and student financial aid to achieve these goals. If parents and teachers deserve to know how well colleges are spending their tuition dollars, shouldn't average citizens also have a way of finding out how well schools are spending their tax dollars?

That's what the *Washington Monthly* College Rankings are meant to provide: a guide not just to what colleges can do for you, but what colleges are doing for the country. For the third year in a row, we've sifted through reams of publicly available data to come up with what we think is a fair assessment of which colleges are living up to their public interest mission, and which aren't. (The full rankings begin on page 42.)

We use three criteria that we believe best measure the impact schools have on the country. The first is social mobility:

# TOP 30 NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES

RANK IN U.S.  
NEWS (2007)

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY                    | 60 |
| 2. University of California, Los Angeles   | 26 |
| 3. University of California, Berkeley      | 21 |
| 4. University of California, San Diego     | 38 |
| 5. Penn. State University, University Park | 47 |
| 6. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor       | 24 |
| 7. Cornell University                      | 12 |
| 8. University of California, Davis         | 47 |
| 9. Stanford University                     | 4  |
| 10. South Carolina State University        | *  |
| 11. Univ. of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign    | 41 |
| 12. Ohio State University, Columbus        | 57 |
| 13. Massachusetts Institute of Technology  | 4  |
| 14. University of Washington               | 42 |
| 15. University of California, Riverside    | 88 |
| 16. University of Virginia                 | 24 |
| 17. University of Pennsylvania             | 7  |
| 18. University of Wisconsin, Madison       | 34 |
| 19. University of Texas, Austin            | 47 |
| 20. Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill   | 27 |
| 21. Iowa State University                  | 81 |
| 22. University of Notre Dame               | 20 |
| 23. College of William and Mary            | 31 |
| 24. University of Southern California      | 27 |
| 25. University of Arizona                  | 98 |
| 26. University of Florida                  | 47 |
| 27. Harvard University                     | 2  |
| 28. Georgetown University                  | 23 |
| 29. Duke University                        | 8  |
| 30. Johns Hopkins University               | 16 |

does the school do a good job recruiting and graduating poorer students? The second is research: is the school supporting the scientific and humanistic study that is key to our national strength, by producing PhDs and winning research grants? And the third is service: how effectively does the school foster an ethic of giving back to the country, either through military or civilian service? (For further details, see "A Note on Methodology," page 53.)

The results, summarized in the charts on pages 42 and 48, may surprise you. First and foremost, you'll notice that the elite schools don't perform nearly as well on the *Washington Monthly's* rankings as they customarily do on *U.S. News's*.

Indeed, among last year's *U.S. News* top ten, only Stanford cracks our top ten. There are also some unexpected stars.

Here are a few of this year's other noteworthy findings:

## RIPPING DOWN THE IVY

Harvard, Yale, and Princeton may make up the top three finishers on this year's *U.S. News* list, but by our measures they don't perform nearly as well. The alma maters of John F. Kennedy, George W. Bush, and Brooke C. Shields come in at, respectively, twenty-seventh, thirty-eighth, and (yikes!) seventy-eighth place. Our top Ivy? Humble Cornell, which places seventh, thanks to the large numbers of its graduates who earn PhDs or join the Peace Corps.

One reason the Ivies as a group fare poorly in our rankings is their abysmal record of taking on and graduating poorer students. Harvard and Yale particularly struggle here, while Cornell's eightieth-place finish in that measure is good enough to lead the Ancient Eight. But there's another factor at work for some: all of the Ivies except Cornell, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania refuse to allow ROTC facilities on campus, which cuts into their service scores. They say excluding ROTC is a matter of principle. We have different principles.

## STATE OF GRACE

In the weird calculations of *U.S. News*, no public universities rank in the nation's top twenty. This would be highly suspicious under any fair measure of academic quality, but when gauging a school's contribution to the country, as we do, it makes no sense at all. And indeed, state schools perform very well on our list, especially the University of California system, which takes four of our top ten spots. Meanwhile, some state schools that were also-rans on the *U.S. News* list are leaders on ours. South Carolina State, which falls into their unranked fourth tier (encompassing the bottom 25 percent), finishes tenth here, thanks to the large numbers of low-income students it accepts and graduates as well as the school's record of supporting ROTC.

## A FAIR AND BALANCED COLLEGE GUIDE

Speaking of state schools, the surprise number one this year—up from fifth in 2006—is Texas A&M. It earns the top spot thanks to an impressive level of ROTC enrollment and a generous amount of federal work-study funds devoted to community service.

Conservatives might see the ascent of the Aggies—better known for football, crew cuts, and the proposed George W. Bush Presidential Library—as a triumph of red-state values. But that's a hard case to make considering the bastions of liberalism that are hot on Texas A&M's heels. UCLA comes in at number two, followed closely by UC Berkeley. UCLA does a great job of accepting and graduating students of modest means, while Berkeley excels at service, and both schools boast a profusion of science and engineering degrees. Educators and members of Congress like to say that there's no

# TOP 30 LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

RANK IN U.S.  
NEWS (2007)

Republican or Democratic way to teach a student. We say the same goes for creating universities that serve the country.

## WE STILL LOVE THE LADIES

In 2006, women's colleges took the top two spots on our liberal arts college list. This year, the fairer sex again posts an impressive showing, capturing two of the top ten and four of the top twenty-five places. They're led by second-place Smith College and the historically black Spelman College at ten (sixty-four spots above its *U.S. News* ranking). Hillary Clinton's alma mater, Wellesley College, places twenty-first, with Mount Holyoke a spot behind. For all-male colleges, only Morehouse puts in a respectable showing, at twentieth place; two others, by contrast, Wabash College and Hampden-Sydney College, place at 171st and 184th respectively. Draw your own conclusions.

## AND THE WINNER OF OUR MISPLACED PRIORITIES AWARD GOES TO . . .

... the California Institute of Technology, which weighs in at 141st on our list, 137 spots off their *U.S. News* rankings. We don't doubt that Caltech students can trip-wire a trapdoor so that a pumpkin frozen in liquid nitrogen will float suspended in midair before disintegrating in front of our very eyes. But the school's record of accepting and graduating low-income students and its ROTC rank are both so low that even its high research score can't save it.

Dishonorable mention goes to Rice University. The best little university in Texas has steadily climbed up the *U.S. News* rankings, all the way to seventeenth, by spending its resources on pursuing students with high SAT scores. But it comes in at 103rd on our rankings, thanks to its extremely low social mobility and service scores. Rice, it appears, is in it for Rice.

If you're looking, then, for information on which schools are the most selective, or which have the nicest swimming pools, the *Washington Monthly* College Rankings aren't for you. But we hope they will be of some use—to students of modest means looking for colleges that will help them succeed; to alumni wanting to get a sense of their alma maters' commitment to the public interest; or to elected officials trying to think of ways to get more bang for the public bucks they're charged with spending on higher education.

We also hope our rankings prove useful to the men and women who teach in and run America's colleges and universities. Many of these folks got into academia for idealistic reasons, and deeply resent the degree to which their institutions have sold their souls in order to move up the *U.S. News* rankings—as Rice has done by ignoring poorer students in favor of those with high SAT scores.

We share their frustration. But rather than dismiss the whole idea of rankings, we invite academics to embrace our rankings. Seriously. If the *Washington Monthly* College

|                                       |    |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| 1. PRESBYTERIAN COLLEGE               | *  |
| 2. Smith College                      | 19 |
| 3. Wheaton College                    | 61 |
| 4. Wesleyan University                | 10 |
| 5. Virginia Military Institute        | 86 |
| 6. Claremont McKenna College          | 12 |
| 7. Bucknell University                | 29 |
| 8. Williams College                   | 1  |
| 9. Amherst College                    | 2  |
| 10. Spelman College                   | 74 |
| 11. Vassar College                    | 12 |
| 12. St. Olaf College                  | 55 |
| 13. Oberlin College                   | 22 |
| 14. Furman University                 | 41 |
| 15. Westminster College               | *  |
| 16. Siena College                     | *  |
| 17. Seton Hill University             | *  |
| 18. St. John's University             | 69 |
| 19. Colgate University                | 16 |
| 20. Morehouse College                 | *  |
| 21. Wellesley College                 | 4  |
| 22. Mount Holyoke College             | 24 |
| 23. Whitman College                   | 36 |
| 24. Washington and Lee University     | 17 |
| 25. Bates College                     | 23 |
| 26. Haverford College                 | 9  |
| 27. College of the Holy Cross         | 32 |
| 28. Hobart and William Smith Colleges | 67 |
| 29. Swarthmore College                | 3  |
| 30. Bryn Mawr College                 | 20 |

Rankings were to become as influential as those of *U.S. News* (hey, it could happen), the whole screwy incentive structure of higher education would change. Schools would no longer have to obsess over SAT scores or jack up the number of applications they ding in order to be recognized as great. Instead, to boost their scores on our list, they would have to recruit and graduate more low-income kids, train more scientists and engineers, and encourage more of their students to serve their country. The end result would be healthier, happier, prouder college campuses, and a more democratic, equitable, and prosperous America. Those are goals we can all rank highly. 